

Principles and Procedures of Materials Development for Language Learning (Part 2)

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Part 1 of this article, in Folio14.1, covered three principles, all based in Language Acquisition theory, and this second part covers three more, again with implications for materials development and working practical examples

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L2 language learners can benefit from using those mental resources which they typically utilise when acquiring and using their L1.

In L1 learning and use learners typically make use of mental imaging (e.g. seeing pictures in their mind), of inner speech, of emotional responses, of connections with their own lives, of evaluations, of predictions, of personal interpretations. In L2 learning and use learners typically focus narrowly on linguistic decoding and encoding. Multi-dimensional representation of language experienced and used can enrich the learning process in ways which promote durable acquisition, the transfer from learning activities to real life use, the development of the ability to use the language effectively in a variety of situations for a variety of uses and the self-esteem which derives from performing in the L2 in ways as complex as they typically do in the L1. See Tomlinson and Avila (2007) for example, for principled suggestions as to how making use of multi-dimensional mental representation can help L2 learners.

There is a considerable literature on the vital use of the inner voice in L1 and the infrequency of use of the inner voice in the L2. What the literature demonstrates is that in the L1 we use the inner voice to give our own voice to what we hear and read, to make plans, to make decisions, to solve problems, to evaluate, to understand and 'control' our environment and to prepare outer voice utterances before saying or writing them. When talking to ourselves we use a restricted code which consists of short elliptical utterances expressed in simple tenses with the focus on the comment rather than the topic, on the predicate rather than the subject. It is cotext and context dependent, implicit, partial, vague, novel and salient to ourselves. However L2 users rarely use an L2 inner voice until they reach an advanced level – though there is evidence that the use of an L2 inner voice at lower levels can enhance L2 performance and can be facilitated by teachers and materials. For further details of the characteristics and roles of the inner voice see de Guerre (2005) and Tomlinson and Avila (2007).

There is also a considerable literature on the role of visual imaging in language use and acquisition. It demonstrates that visual imaging plays a very important role in L1 learning and use, that it tends not to be used by L2 learners and that L2 learners can be trained to use visual imaging to improve their learning and use of the L2. For details of

research on mental imaging and its application to materials development see in particular Tomlinson and Avila (2007).

Principles of Materials Development

1 Make use of activities which get learners to visualise and/or use inner speech before during and after experiencing a written or spoken text.

2 Make use of activities which get learners to visualise and/or use inner speech before during and after using language themselves.

3 Make use of activities which help the learners to reflect on their mental activity during a task and then to try to make more use of mental strategies in a similar task.

Examples of Materials

I build into all my materials activities which encourage and help the students to visualise, to talk to themselves in inner speech and to make connections with their lives. For example, before asking the students to read a poem about a boy's first day at school I asked the students to visualise their own first day at school and then to talk to themselves about how they felt.

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Language learners can benefit from noticing salient features of the input.

If learners notice for themselves how a particular language item or feature is used, they are more likely to develop their language awareness (Bolitho et al 2003) and they are also more likely to achieve readiness for acquisition. Such noticing is most salient when a learner has been engaged in a text affectively and cognitively and then returns to it to investigate its language use. This is likely to lead to the learner paying more attention to similar uses of that item or feature in subsequent inputs and to increase its potential for eventual acquisition.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Use an experiential approach in which the learners are first of all provided with an experience which engages them holistically. From this experience they learn implicitly without focusing conscious attention on any particular features of the experience. Later they re-visit and reflect on the experience and pay conscious attention to features of it in order to achieve explicit learning. This enables the learners to apprehend before they comprehend and to intuit before they explore. And it means that when they focus narrowly on a specific feature of the text they are able to develop their discoveries in relation to their awareness of the full context of use.

2 Rather than drawing the learners' attention to a particular feature of a text and then providing explicit information about its use it is much more powerful to help the learners (preferably in collaboration) to make discoveries for themselves.

Examples of Materials

I use a lot of language awareness materials in which the students experience a potentially engaging text, respond to it personally and then focus on a particular feature of the text in order to make discoveries about it. For example, the students read about a student whose parents gave him a graduation party. They then discussed the reasons why the parents gave him the party and the reasons he was reluctant to attend it. Next one half of the class analysed the father's use of the interrogative and the other half analysed the son's use of the imperative. They came together in groups to share their discoveries and then they wrote a version of the text in which the mother (rather than the father) tried to persuade the son to attend the party.

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Learners need opportunities to use language to try to achieve communicative purposes.

When using language in this way they are gaining feedback on the hypotheses they have developed as a result of generalising on the language in their intake and on their ability to make use of them effectively. If they are participating in interaction, they are also being pushed to clarify and elaborate and they are also likely to elicit meaningful and comprehensible input from their interlocutors.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Provide many opportunities for the learners to produce language in order to achieve intended outcomes.

2 Make sure that these output activities are designed so that the learners are using language rather than just practising specified features of it.

3 Design output activities so that they help learners to develop their ability to communicate fluently, accurately, appropriately and effectively.

4 Make sure that the output activities are fully contextualised in that the learners are responding to an authentic stimulus (e.g. a text, a need, a viewpoint, an event), that they have specific addressees and that they have a clear intended outcome in mind.

5 Try to ensure that opportunities for feedback are built into output activities.

Examples of Materials

I develop a lot of material in which the students have to produce a text which is a development from one they have just experienced. For example, in one unit the students had to make up an oral circle story about strange creatures on a beach as a development of their acting out of their teacher's narration of a story. In another unit they had to re-locate a story set in Liverpool in their own city. In another unit they had to design an improved version of a vehicle in a newspaper advert, then to write a newspaper advert and then to perform a tv advert for their vehicle.

Conclusion

When developing classroom materials we should also, of course, consider principles of language teaching. My main teaching principle is that:

The teaching should meet the needs and wants of the learners.

From this my most important materials development principle is that:

Materials need to be written in such a way that the teacher can make use of them as a resource and not have to follow them as a script.

It seems that most classroom materials are written though for teachers and students to follow. It also seems that many of them not driven or even informed by principles of language acquisition and development. Some of them manage to help learners to acquire language because their writers have been effective teachers and are intuitively applying principles of teaching. Most of them would be a lot more effective if they were driven by the principles of acquisition I have outlined above.

(This paper is an adaptation of part of Tomlinson, B. (2010) Principles and procedures of materials development. In N. Harwood (ed.) *Materials in ELT: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

If you would like a fuller list of references relating to the themes of this article contact me at brianjohntomlinson@gmail.com

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